

## FOOD BLOGGING: GENRE CHARACTERISTICS AND SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

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*The purpose of this study is to explore the cross-cultural differences in online presentation by applying Goffman's theory of self-presentation. The study content-analyzes 100 most popular Russian and American food blogs. The results of the study indicated that food blogs serve a platform for crafting online identity. More precisely, Russian food bloggers pay closer attention to the need to be part of the group, making wide use of positive politeness strategies, aiming at friendliness and solidarity with their readers. Food bloggers in US are more likely to use self-promotion strategy by showcasing their food philosophy and special mission.*

*Key words: food blogging, food-blog genre, self-presentation strategies*

Internet environment is a continuously developing system of interrelated communicative genres. E-mail, Chat and Forum – the first traditional online genres – have undergone little change in the last years. In contrast, blogs, having emerged in the 1990s, exhibit a more dynamic nature, evolve rapidly and unite all bloggers in one blogosphere. As a result, over the past few years we have witnessed the growing number of blogs, which can be classified according to content (*food blogs, travelogues, edublogs, political blogs, etc.*) and form (*text, videoblogs, photoblogs*). Food blogging has become increasingly popular in recent years, so much that the international blogging award, the Bloggies, and the national award of the Russian Federation Russian, the Runet Prize, have a separate category for the Best Food Blog.

This study is based on Goffman's theory of self-presentation. Erving Goffman was the first to state that “whenever a person enters the presence of others, self-presentation arises and the individual engages in staging performances to audience” [7, p.27]. Self-presentation has been used several times to analyze how people present themselves through online media [3; 5; 11; 18; 19]. Food blogs present a significant topic of study because they are characterized by social psychology of self-disclosure [4, p.57]. Kramer and Winter distinguished online self-presentation from self-presentation in daily life stating that online self-presentation is more strategic [13, p.106]. Rosenberg [17, p.84] also studied the management of online impressions, and identified four self-presentation tactics used in Facebook: manipulation, damage control, self-promotion, and role model. Jung, Youn, and McClung [9, p. 69] discussed four self-presentation tactics in blogs: 1) demonstration of competence; 2) supplication; 3) exemplification; and 4) ingratiation. Russian researchers also pay close attention to online self presentation. Bagenova and Ivanova describe semantic and stylistic characteristics of blogs [2, p.125-131]. Rafikova studies functions and forms of social media gluttony discourse [16, p.131-136]. Elkina states that “user-nicks are the main means of self-presentation on blog entries [6, p.88]. Kozlova examined cross-cultural differences based on Russian and German blogs [12, p.113-115]. In fact, there is very little empirical evidence to indicate the extent to which Russian and American food bloggers use the same strategies to present themselves online.

Based on the previously reviewed literature, the following research questions are asked: What are the key characteristics that make food-blog genre stand out from other types of online genres?; What strategies do food bloggers use to craft their online identities?; Do Russian and American food bloggers use the same repertoire of strategies to present themselves online? The purpose of this study is to highlight food-blog's genre characteristics and to analyze communicative strategies and tactics Russian and American food bloggers use to craft their online identities.

The study content-analyzed 50 top American food blogs ranked by popularity and influence at the American Food Bloggers website [1] and 50 top Russian food blogs listed in the online magazine Хлеб Соль [10].

To answer the first research question we first focused on general descriptive genre elements of food blogs. Content-analysis of 100 most popular Russian and American food blog entries revealed the following **key characteristics of food-blog genre**: Firstly, food blog genre has a complex structure, comprising the following subgenres: narrative story, food recipe, instruction, recommendation, advice; Secondly, this genre presents a written monologue, written by one or a group of authors on a specific topic – food; Finally, it is aimed at a complex influence on a recipient combining verbal and visual form.

To answer the second and third research questions the entries of 100 Russian and American food blogs were content analyzed. The study showed that Russian and American food bloggers use three types of self-presentation strategies to craft their online identity: **self-promotion, ingratiation and inspiration**.

#### **Self-promotion strategy**

Self-promotion strategy is aimed at convincing people of our competence, trying to get people to think we are capable, intelligent or talented [as cited in 19]. The study showed that 67 % of Russian and 72 % of American food bloggers tend to make use of self-promoting strategy, which in turn, is realized by means of the following tactics: **self-presentation, competence and solidarity** with a target reader.

Food bloggers explicitly / directly or indirectly describe their own attributes in order to be seen positively in the eyes of target readers. They generally add personal information to their Profile Section including their name, surname, date of birth, education (amateur foodie or chef), and links to their books, etc. An example of this is illustrated in a number of Profile Sections:

*Hi there. I'm Shauna James Ahern. I'm the writer, photographer, and baker for this site. And I'm Daniel Ahern. For years, Shauna referred to me as the Chef on this site. I'm the head recipe developer, especially for anything savory. I choose all the photos for the post. And generally, I'm guiding the work behind the scenes. Together, we create Gluten-free girl. Here, we share stories of family, friends, and the food that gathered us around the table. We love to tell the stories of the creative people who move us: bakers, sculptors, chefs, and photographers. And we share the insights we've planed about gluten-free baking after playing with flours for more than a decade. WE love thinking and talking about food, cooking food, photographing food, and sharing food. We love feeling our people [23].* From the food blogs chosen for my study, Blog [23] is perhaps the most explicit. The authors openly self-present, stating their personal information and reasons for writing.

The close analysis of the information presented in the Profile Section helped us to identify the following reasons why food bloggers started food blogging: to chronicle their family's lives, goals and accomplishments, to self-present, to share information and their passion for cooking, as is the case in the following examples:

*"I started this blog to document my life after college; mostly to share recipes I baked on weekends" [31].*

*"It started because I'm really picky, honestly. I would see a recipe online that had hundreds of positive reviews, then I'd make it, and I just didn't like it. So I would find a way to make it better, less fussy or with fewer steps, and share it" [32].*

*"Crisp, foggy mornings and mind-blowing colors. Yep, it's fall again. The woods are full of various kinds of mushrooms which are only waiting to be foraged by curious souls. So let's embrace this season, its produce, and the way of slow living; fresh and simple cooking, baking, good reads, some knitting, spending time both outdoors and indoors, a glass of red wine. I hope you'll find some inspiration here. Cause that's what I want this space to do. To inspire you to cook and bake. To inspire you to live by the seasons. To inspire you to gather around a table and make you see and appreciate the beauty of fresh, local produce" [28].*

Interestingly, 90 % of the Russian and 84 % of the American authors described themselves positively on their food blogs choosing direct way of self-expression. The author of the blog My Blue and White Kitchen, for example, states directly her true passion for and cooking mentioning things she is not yet good at:

*"Although I consider myself a serious food enthusiast and a passionate cook and baker, there certainly are ingredients that I don't use that often or that I'm rather unfamiliar with. Similarly, there are dishes, even classics that I've never made either because they somehow scare me to death, because I have never really been in the mood to make them, or because it just has never happened. I've never made a tarte tatin or a summery granita. Pulled pork is still on my recipes-to-tackle list. Brownies? Oh well... I've made filled pasta shells numerous times but have never made cannelloni at home" [28].*

It is interesting to note that both Russian and American food bloggers rarely used negative emotional tone for self-presentation as that could make them appear less attractive.

There is a strong reason behind food bloggers use of **competence tactic**: people generally want to be perceived as skilled, qualified and competent [as cited in 19]. The research highlighted that both Russian and American food bloggers demonstrate competence through sound arguments, providing advice, making wide use of terminology (food signs / gluttonyms) and adverbs of frequency and time (*never, always, often*). Competence tactic is generally introduced by the words: *The best approach is ..., Try not to ..., I often ..., I prefer ..., Как я считаю ..., Я всегда ..., Я никогда ...*, etc., as in the following examples:

*"Cook the cakes on each side for about 4 minutes, try not to turn them too often or you'll risk them falling apart" [33].*

Food signs / gluttonyms structure the common space of gastronomic discourse [14] that is why food bloggers often use cooking terminology and food preparation terms, such as: *thicken* (the process of making a liquid substance dense by adding a thickening agent), *truss* (to tie or skewer meat into a neat shape before cooking), *try out* (to heat fat slowly until it liquefies and can be drawn off), *to age* (to let food get older under controlled conditions), *baste* (to brush or spoon food as it cooks with melted fat or the cooking juices from the dish), *зратинировать* (прием

кулинарной обработки для улучшения вкусовых качеств и внешнего вида блюд), тарировать (использование кухонных весов для определения веса продукта), etc., as in the following examples:

*“Barding helps keep the bird moist while roasting and adds additional flavor. Trussing poultry that has been barded holds the bacon strips down securely. Use a significantly longer piece of twine as you’ll be making extra loops”* [26].

*“Вскипятить воду в сотейнике, бланшировать миндаль в течение 3 минут. Слить воду, дать миндалю слегка остыть, а после очистить миндаль от кожицы и подсушить в духовке при 180 С в течение 5-6 минут”* [25].

The research revealed that Russian food bloggers often use English words on their food blog entries that might also be suggestive of their competence. It is a natural phenomenon as food bloggers cannot find an equivalent in their language to refer to a new or unfamiliar concept coming from a different culture. Generally, English words are transcribed into the Cyrillic alphabet according to their English pronunciation, English orthography or mixing the latter two methods. For example: *боул, флетбред* (или нутовая лепешка), *фингерфуд* (порционная еда на «один укус»), *комменты, лайфхаки*, etc. For example:

*“Друзья! Здесь вы найдете рецепты, кулинарные лайфхаки, статьи об ингредиентах, уникальные интервью с шеф-поварами и много всего интересного!”* [22].

The striking observation to emerge from the data comparison was that Russian food bloggers tend to resort to solidarity tactic through “We” pronoun, emphasizing collective identity whereas American bloggers focus on self-interests and are more likely to use “You” pronoun while addressing their readers:

*Акцентом у нас выступит вишня. Самый простой вариант мы уже рассмотрели* [20].

*Безусловно, при возможности чизкейк нужно готовить с сыром «Филадельфия», но в условиях санкций мы с вами обойдемся творожным сыром любой марки* [24].

*Dill isn’t really in season at the moment, but I do love to have these burgers with a little dill. You can usually buy it at the grocery store in those little plastic clamshells that cost too much. Know the ones I’m talking about? But if you’re not super excited about the expensive-winter-dill-in-a-clamshell situation, you can use 1) freeze-dried dill, which I keep in my spice collection year-round, and 2) any other fresh herb! I made a version of these with parsley and cilantro when I didn’t have any dill, and mwah. They were still totally delicious* [29].

Examples [24] and [29] illustrate the bloggers attempt to create unity with their target readers by making them feel involved. These differences in online presentation are consistent with individualistic and collectivistic orientation of the cultures [8, p.37].

### **Ingratiation Strategy**

Ingratiation strategy is a technique in which an individual attempts to influence another by becoming more attractive or likeable to their target. The term was coined by social psychologist Edward E. Jones. Russian and American food bloggers construct their online identities wishing to present a favorable image of themselves to readers. The following ways of attracting readers’ attention were frequent in the data: direct address and including elements of the dialogue and questions into the monologue:

*Смотрите, я распределил спатулой шоколад по пергаменту, скрутил его в рулет ... Не спешите перемешивать страницу, ярые противники тыквы. Это пирожное осторожно и робко попытается влюбить Вас в этот овощ, дав легкий, ароматный и ненавязчивый вкус* [20].

*If you've been following me on my Blog's Stories, you may have seen the development of these cinnamon rolls over the past couple weeks [27].*

Both American and Russian food bloggers appeal to different sensory modalities: visual (*смотрите*), taste (*легкий, ненавязчивый вкус*), smell (*ароматное*).

*Помните, в детстве мы все ходили по улицам с эскимо на палочке? «Почему не использовать этот в десерте?» - подумал я [20].*

*Oh She Glows just celebrated her 9th birthday! Can you believe it? (I know, I know, where is the cake? I didn't plan this very well, did I? I promise you today's recipe is a keeper even if it's not covered in frosting. Do you think cheese-covered will do the trick?!) [30].*

Interestingly, both Russian and American food bloggers present their points of view and inner thoughts in brackets.

### **Inspiration strategy**

The main aim of inspiration strategy is to motivate target readers for further actions, mainly cooking dishes. Food bloggers use both non-verbal / visual (beautiful step by step photos) and verbal means of motivation. Different ways of motivating readers were frequent in the data: exclamatory, conditional and imperative sentences:

*Десерту не обязательно быть сладким-сладким, правда? Он может быть сырным! Сладкая рикотта не потому, что с сахаром, его нет, а потому, что она бывает salata – соленая, в смысле свежая, без соли, не выдержанная, не копченая) [21].*

*Итог?! Пирожное, которое полюбит любой!... Терпкая сладость, солодовые нотки и темный шоколад – потрясающее завершение этой осенней истории! [20].*

*Разогреть духовку до 190 C. Форму смазать сливочным маслом, выложить слоеное тесто, часто наколоть вилкой. Разболтать оставшееся яйцо, смазать верх. Отправить на 45 минут в духовку [21].*

*Peel and dice the cooked potatoes and place in a large mixing bowl. Use your fingers to flake in the cooked fish [33].*

*() If you have less time you can thaw under a steady stream of cold, running water while still covered or in the microwave. Only use the microwave if you plan to cook or serve the food immediate [34].*

As seen from the above examples, the following speech acts are often used by both Russian and American food bloggers on their entries: instruction, direction, advice, suggestion.

Content analysis of food blogs revealed the importance of self-promotion strategy to food bloggers as it helps them to stand out amid a range of many other food bloggers. The following characteristics of food-blog genre were identified: complex structure; subgenres: narrative story, food recipe, instruction, recommendation, advice; a written monologue on a specific topic – food; creolized text. The study showed that Russian and American food bloggers use three types of self-presentation strategies to craft their online identity: self-promotion, ingratiation and inspiration. 67 % of Russian and 72 % of American food bloggers tend to make use of self-promoting strategy, which is realized by the following tactics: 1) self-presentation revealing that 90 % of the Russian and 84 % of the American food bloggers described themselves positively on their food blogs choosing direct way of self-expression; 2) demonstration of competence indicating that the food bloggers want to be perceived as skilled and qualified; through sound arguments, providing advice, making wide use of terminology (food signs / gluttonyms) and adverbs of frequency and time; 3) solidarity demonstrating common interest with the target reader. The most striking observation to

emerge from the data comparison was that Russian food bloggers tend to resort to solidarity tactic through “We” pronoun, emphasizing collective identity whereas American bloggers focus on self-interests and are more likely to use “You” pronoun while addressing their readers. Russian and American food bloggers construct their online identities aiming at attracting readers’ attention through direct address, including elements of the dialogue and questions into the monologue and appealing to different sensory modalities: visual, taste and smell. Different ways of motivating readers were frequent in the data: exclamatory, conditional and imperative sentences.

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